

For Immediate Release:
June 28, 2005

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GPDSC Steps Up Efforts to Aid Defendants with Mental Illness Pilot Program to Quickly Identify Mental Illness, Focus Tax Dollars

Atlanta –The Georgia Public Defender Standards Council (GPDSC) announced today that it is partnering with the Alternative Sentencing and Mitigation Institute (ASMI) to implement their Alternative Sentencing and Assessment Program (ASAP) in Fulton County. The goal of the defense-based program is to identify indigent defendants in county jails who suffer from mental illness and/or developmental disabilities, encourage alternative sentencing options for those defendants, and cut down on excessive use of expert funds. The 120-day pilot program officially began on June 15, 2005.

Paul Kehir, a deputy director at GPDSC who oversees the state agency's spending on experts, explained that GPDSC will be monitoring ASAP to determine the cost effectiveness of identifying the mentally ill as soon as possible after entry into the criminal justice system and providing treatment alternatives to the courts. Kehir stated, "We hope to establish that this approach saves costs associated with incarceration in city and county jails, improves case management and reduces recidivism. We are attempting to secure appropriate mental health care for our clients with mental illness, make the most efficient use of our experts and create a fiscally sound program that can be replicated throughout Georgia."

ASAP will initially target defendants with felony indictments from the Fulton County Superior Court in the Atlanta Judicial Circuit. Referrals to the program will come from Fulton County Pretrial Services and the mental health staff of the Fulton County Jail. After referred inmates are assigned counsel, an ASAP forensic social worker will do an assessment and create a psychological history to be kept in the defendant's file. This history will offer treatment recommendations and placement options for alternative sentencing. The social worker will also offer an impression of competency.

"Defense attorneys frequently don't recognize or understand the mental health issues faced by their clients. This lack of recognition can lead the attorney to 'fish' for experts as they try to pinpoint whether their client has a mental illness, suffers from mental retardation, or has a chemical addiction," stated Tamara Hurst with ASMI. "In addition, many expert reports don't include therapeutic options for sentencing recommendations. ASMI's experienced forensic social workers prepare this critical information for defense attorneys so that they can represent their clients with mental illness effectively."

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ASAP represents an enormous collaborative effort within the criminal justice system, and Fulton County Court Administrator Judith Cramer thinks the program is essential to quickly identify those defendants who need treatment rather than incarceration. Cramer stated that “the cost to keep defendants with mental illness in the system lengthy amounts of time until we later identify their needs is unnecessary.”

For further information about GPDSC and the ASAP program, please contact Allison Manning at 404-232-8900.

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